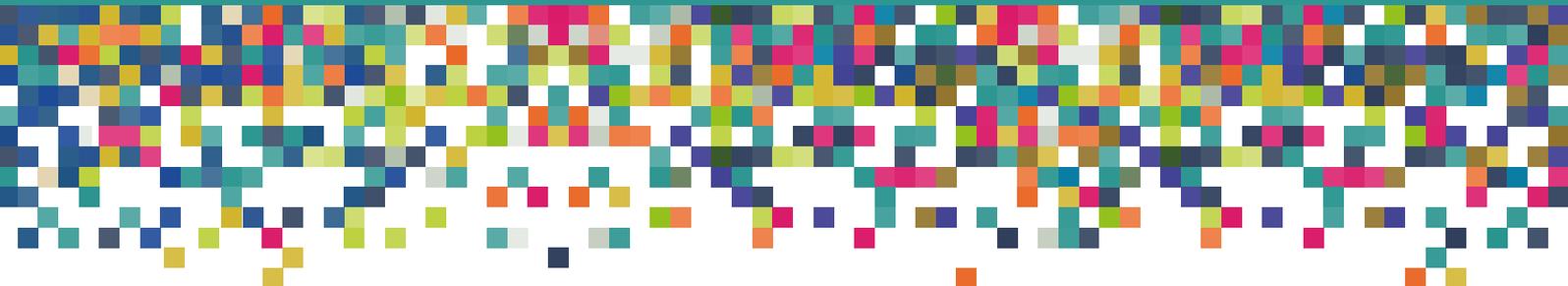




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### **Hegemonic Femininity: A Laughing Matter?**

**A Critical Discourse Analysis of Contemporary  
Stand-Up Comedy in the United States on the Issue  
of Female Reproductive Rights**

Isabella Hastings



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# 1 ABSTRACT

*This study explores alternative media representations of the issue of female reproductive rights in the United States through the platform of stand-up comedy. In the United States, a woman's right to an abortion is federally mandated by the 1973 Supreme Court ruling *Roe v. Wade*. However, recent state efforts to pass restrictive bills that oppose *Roe*, and efforts by the Trump administration to defund family planning organizations such as Planned Parenthood, challenge women's access to safe and affordable abortion and reproductive health care. It is not only important that these challenges to female reproductive rights are broadly criticized, but it is also important how the issue is discussed. Efforts to limit women's reproductive autonomy hinge on discourses of hegemonic femininity and ideologies that place motherhood as women's sole reproductive choice. The mainstream media in the United States consistently fail to communicate the complex issue of female reproductive rights and instead propagate these discourses that seek to limit women's reproductive freedom. Alternative media, however, and stand-up comedy specifically, historically provide a platform for voices to challenge power structures, and could, therefore, be a potential site of resistance against the hegemonic concepts of femininity threatening female reproductive freedom in the United States.*

*This study uses a critical discourse analysis of three variations of contemporary stand-up comedy from three comedians to consider the question: What are the ways in which contemporary stand-up comedy challenges hegemonic femininity in the context of female reproductive rights in the United States?*

*The conceptual framework of feminist theory helps to guide an analysis of how gender hierarchies are expressed and discursively enacted. The two discursive strategies of 'pushing the edge' of hegemonic femininity by interrogating latent assumptions, and the gendering or non-gendering of discourse are put forth as tools used by contemporary stand-up comedians to challenge patriarchal power systems and hegemonic femininity.*

## 2 INTRODUCTION

In 2019, in the United States, restrictive laws on the issue of female reproductive rights passed in some 30 states, 15 of which passed laws that are colloquially termed ‘heartbeat bills,’ banning abortion after just six weeks of pregnancy (BBC, 2019). Many of these laws are unconstitutional, and the states that are passing them know that, as they directly challenge a woman’s right to an abortion as mandated through the 1973 Supreme Court ruling, *Roe v. Wade* (BBC, 2019). The rationale behind these unconstitutional state efforts, then, is that the laws will be brought to the conservative-led Supreme Court, as it currently stands, to re-visit and revoke the legality of abortion through *Roe*. In addition to challenges to *Roe*, in 2019, the Trump administration has taken steps to restrict federal funding of Planned Parenthood and other family planning organizations (Belluck, 2019), further limiting women’s access to contraception and reproductive health care.

With women’s reproductive rights precariously positioned in the United States, it is crucial *that* the issue is widely discussed, but it is also important *how* the issue is discussed. The debate surrounding female reproductive rights is historically approached from the two opposing camps of choice and life - where one is either pro-choice or pro-life (Palczewski, 2010). Pro-choice activists argue in favor of women’s right to choose elective abortion, while the contemporary pro-life movement is ‘socially conservative, evangelical Christian-based’ (DaoJensen, 2013: 614) and against abortion, arguing that the fetus is unborn-life that must be protected. However, the issue of female reproductive rights is far more complicated than the diametrically opposed pro-life and pro-choice debate allows. Instead of being an issue singularly concerned with abortion, the struggle for female reproductive rights is one of comprehensive demands that includes, but is not limited to abortion (Palczewski, 2010). The recent efforts to roll back *Roe* and defund Planned Parenthood not only threaten women’s access to safe and affordable abortion, but also threaten, among other things, women’s access to safe and affordable health care, and disproportionately affect women from marginalized communities (Defares, 2019). With the issue of female reproductive rights taking on new and urgent relevance in the present-day United States, this dissertation explores the societal power structures that seek to limit women’s reproductive freedom. Mainstream media consistently fail to present the complexities surrounding the fight for women’s reproductive rights and contribute to the pronatalist ideology central to hegemonic femininity. By focusing on content that specifically addresses the issue of female reproductive rights, I consider how stand-up comedy, as a form of alternative media, gives voice to marginalized communities and challenges hegemonic beliefs about femininity.

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This study begins with a theoretical analysis of publics, counter-publics, and discourse to identify the ideological phenomenon of hegemony. It then moves to a specific critique of public discussion on the issue of female reproductive rights to locate the role of hegemonic femininity in shaping that discourse. Additionally, the language of 'choice' is problematized due to its focus on abortion as the signifying issue for women's reproductive rights. The term 'reproductive freedom' is introduced as a more comprehensive term for female reproductive autonomy, one that calls for a variety of reproductive rights including abortion and reproductive health care. Next, this study unpicks the role of mainstream media in perpetuating hegemonic ideologies, using examples of the mainstream media's framing of female reproductive rights as a demonstration of its inadequacy as a space to challenge hegemonic femininity. Alternative media is analyzed as a potential space for voices systematically repressed by dominant institutions. Finally, stand-up comedy is put forth as an alternative media form that, through the use of political satire, supports the critique of hegemonic femininity and the articulation of female reproductive rights from a perspective that promotes women's autonomy over their bodies.

While the social role of humor as a critique of power has been largely studied, this project focuses specifically on features of stand-up comedy and in what ways those features challenge concepts of hegemonic femininity through content addressing the topical issue of female reproductive rights. Locating the discursive strategies of 'pushing the edge' of hegemonic ideologies by interrogating latent societal assumptions and the gendering or non-gendering of discourse, this study engages with feminist theory, with a particular emphasis on poststructuralist feminism, to offer a critique of patriarchal systems of power.

### **3 THEORETICAL CHAPTER**

This theoretical chapter consists of a literature review and a conceptual framework. The literature review outlines the existing scholarship used to guide this study. Next, feminist theory and its role informing this research is introduced through the conceptual framework. Finally, within the conceptual framework, the study's aims and objectives are presented.

#### **3.1 LITERATURE REVIEW**

##### **3.1.1 THEORIES OF PUBLICS, DISCOURSES, AND HEGEMONY**

The public sphere is a social arena in which its members attempt to shape and control the state's approach to certain issues through discussion, criticism, and the formation of public opinion (Fuchs, 2010). Multiple publics can exist within a state, and people can belong to more than one public (Warner, 2002). As such, the struggle over the ways in which the social world is projected is often led by the dominant public to the exclusion of minority groups (Warner, 2002). Alternative publics, or counter-publics, allow those subordinated groups to challenge the cultural assumptions posited by the public sphere and to develop oppositional interpretations of their identities and ideologies, which combat those originating from and maintained by the public sphere (Bone, 2010) or other counter-publics (Fraser, 1989).

By projecting the social world in ways that are guided by the ideologies of publics (Warner, 2002) - their beliefs and values - discourse can be used as a tool to influence the implementation of ideas, the regulation of other people's conduct, and the power relations that are tied to the creation of knowledge (Hall, 2001). Discourse should broadly be understood as language use - messaging through text or talk - which is critical to the structuring of social life (Wodak and Meyer, 2008). A discursive event occurs in relation to 'the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s), which frame it' (Wodak and Meyer, 2008: 5), and plays an important social role as an object of knowledge that may sustain, reproduce, or subvert the social status quo (Wodak and Meyer, 2008). Counter-discourses, discourses originating from beyond the dominant culture, challenge social systems of power by exploiting the limitations and vulnerabilities from society's dominant discourses, thus exposing them to contestation. In developing counter-discourses, counter-publics often rely on dialogic techniques such as 'unique vocabularies, tactics, and arguments' (Bone, 2010: 19) to express different worldviews, counteract socio-cultural homogenization and challenge existing power structures through discourse (Gardiner, 2004).

When dominant ideologies - the beliefs posited and contained by the dominant culture - are ingrained in a society to the point where they *seem* permanent, normal and common sense, we come to what is understood as hegemony (Atton, 2002). Attempts to control dominant ideologies, and 'struggles over cultural meanings and social identities are struggles for cultural hegemony, that is, for the power to construct authoritative definitions of social situations and legitimate interpretations of social needs' (Fraser, 1989: 6). While the hegemonic ideologies shaped by the dominant culture are mobile, and not static, they are powerful methods of social control that define the status quo for a given society, and dictate what is considered 'normal' (O'Brien Hallstein, 2010). In a democratic system, such as the United States, hegemonic ideologies can have palpable consequences due to the ways in which they define how issues are discussed and subsequently implemented.

### 3.1.2 DISCOURSE AND FEMALE REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

According to Thakkilapati (2019), 'the struggle for reproductive justice is a struggle over the meanings and practices associated with hegemonic femininity' (p. 63). The hegemony socially constructs normative gender conventions and come to define the meanings and behaviors associated with masculinity and femininity (West and Zimmerman, 1987). In the United States, hegemonic femininity rests on a heterosexual narrative of motherhood, one that involves specific prerequisites including, but not limited to, an intentional pregnancy occurring between a man and a wife which receives care and monitoring both before and after birth, and is financially independent of government support (Thakkilapati, 2019). By internalizing societal gender norms, both men and women legitimize hegemonic femininity through their actions and the discourses they produce in everyday life (Lazar, 2005). 'Media portrayals, medical expert advice, religious decrees, and folk narratives about sexuality and reproduction' (Thakkilapati, 2019: 65) all participate in the construction and legitimation of this hegemonic femininity and a narrative that distinguishes motherhood as the ideal reality for women. Pronatalism, the belief that child-bearing and parenthood is the singular socially desirable reproductive path for women, and abortion is a rejection of women's mothering role, currently dominates the United States socio-political context, supports this hegemonic femininity, and sets the tone for public discourse on the issue of female reproductive rights (Mollen, 2014). As a result, misconceptions 'that women regret abortions, are physically and psychologically harmed by them, and are advantaged by continuing their pregnancies to term' (Mollen, 2014: 163) are prevalent across the United States, and act as the basis for restrictive abortion legislation and informed consent. Additionally, the very real physical and psychological risks of pregnancy and childbirth are missing from public discourse on the issue of female reproductive rights (Mollen, 2014).

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This lack of discourse on the reproductive reality of women is, in part, because hegemonic femininity and pronatalism are born of a dominant patriarchal system that subordinates women to men. As a result, women have turned to counter-public spheres to develop discourses that challenge these ideologies that seek to limit women's reproductive autonomy (Bone, 2010). But since, as outlined above, women's reproductive rights, especially abortion, deviates from the normative behavior conventions set by the dominant culture, it remains a relatively 'taboo' topic in the United States (Wallace, 2019). However, particularly with current state efforts to restrict women's reproductive autonomy, it is important to understand how the issue is criticized, beyond the public sphere, through counter discourses that seek to challenge hegemonic femininity and support female reproductive freedom.

Choice has come to mean the 'unencumbered right to determine when, whether, and with whom to have children... it is invariably wed to notions of women's individual autonomy and empowerment' (Fixmer-Oraiz, 2010: 28). While the language of choice challenges the hegemonic ideologies that place motherhood at the center of femininity, it is, ultimately, limited in its ability to support a multiplicity of women's lived experiences by creating new assumptions about women's reproductive needs and interests (Palczewski, 2010). Fixmer-Oraiz (2010) problematizes the discursive limits of 'choice' by considering how it fails to place the reproductive health of *all* women at the center of the fight for women's reproductive freedom. While men are hierarchically placed above women in the patriarchal gender order, many different relations of power overlap with this gender structure, those based on 'race/ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, age, culture and geography' (Lazar, 2005: 10). As a result, gender oppression is experienced and discursively maintained differently for different women (Lazar, 2005). The language of choice, argues Fixmer-Oraiz (2010), has been greatly criticized by women of color and poor women due to its failure to acknowledge a history within the United States of systematic attempts to use contraception to limit women's reproductive autonomy along lines delineated by a woman's race, economic class, or nationality. Additionally, while *legally* guaranteed by *Roe*, reproductive choices are not *economically* guaranteed.

*Women's decisions are largely determined by income: wealth equals access to a range of maternal and reproductive options; poverty or a reliance on public funding for health care translates into governmental regulation of one's reproductive health-care decisions (Fixmer-Oraiz, 2010: 43).*

The freedom of choice, therefore, is not a reality for *all* women in the United States.

With the above discursive limits to the language of choice in mind, 'reproductive freedom' is put forth as an alternate term relating to issues of female reproductive justice. Whereas the language of choice was created and developed by white middle-class women's movements, 'reproductive freedom' was brought forth by women of color and poor women who sought to change the discourse on issues of maternity and reproduction to include their lived experiences, rather than simply those of white-middle class women (Palczewski, 2010). Central to the term is the belief that reproductive autonomy is far more comprehensive than access to abortion, and includes 'issues such as forced sterilization, access to pre- and postnatal care, adequate food and housing, access to quality education, and the right to be sexual' (Palczewski, 2010: 80). While the language of reproductive freedom has not permeated public discourse to the level of the language of choice, it has opened up the debate to reframe the issue of female reproductive rights as one that goes beyond abortion advocacy and includes a multiplicity of women's lived experiences (Palczewski, 2010).

### 3.1.3 MAINSTREAM MEDIA AND HEGEMONY

Mainstream media play a central role in the creation and dissemination of discourses that orient us towards particular representations of the world. Even individuals with strong ideological standpoints may gradually reformulate their views on issues when repeatedly exposed to counter evidence through different discursive presentations (Wilson, 2008). As social systems, mainstream media can 'reach a wide public and are therefore part of communication processes in public spheres' (Fuchs, 2010: 175). News media, in particular, are idealistically projected by journalists as reflections of 'the world as it is' (Davis, 2007: 54), however, according to Davis (2007), the media may perpetuate social power imbalances by supporting ideologies through the omission of certain narratives and the simultaneous over-reporting of others. As a result, media may be used to mobilize the bias rampant in public discourse and strengthen hegemonic power relations in society (O'Brien Hallstein, 2010). Similarly, while the expressions of hegemonic ideologies within mainstream media change over time, these shifts represent an ability by the media to absorb ideas that challenge the dominant culture thus limiting any potential social or ideological change (Cuklanz, 2016). The mainstream media, therefore, create a system that is 'monolithic and inflexible, within which the representation of dissident, radical and otherwise 'unofficial' voices is largely predictable: if heard at all, such voices will be demonised and marginalised' (Atton, 2002: 492).

### 3.1.4 MAINSTREAM MEDIA AND FEMALE REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

*Media routinely report on women's issues without a female in sight, minimize reproductive rights as a mere phenomenon of a 'cultural war,' and promote a*

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*tenuous role for women wherein the other sex should be desired by men, but not express (or even have) her own desires, lest she become a slutty, fetus-aborting, moral-debasing heathen (Tady, 2012: 5).*

Perhaps unsurprisingly then, women are consistently underrepresented in mainstream media, to a point where studies show as much as '80 percent of news subjects are men, and that approximately 80 percent of expert sources are male' (Cuklanz, 2016: 3). This gender disparity has serious implications in terms of how issues, such as female reproductive rights, are discussed by the media, how societies interpret women's health and sexuality, and how women themselves view their own self-worth (Tady, 2012). For example, in looking specifically at the media response to an Obama era mandate ensuring health insurance coverage of contraception, Tady (2012) considers how mainstream media framed the debate as a religious freedom issue as opposed to a reproductive rights issue.

*Over a five-day period when the 'controversy' reached its height, cable news networks interviewed only one public health expert out of 301 guests, setting the frame that access to contraception isn't a healthcare issue (Tady, 2012: 5).*

Similarly, Douglas (2013) argues that when it comes to female reproductive rights, mainstream media disproportionately cover those who support pro-life legislation in comparison with the little to no national media coverage pro-choice individuals receive. This media frame, which privileges 'mostly-white-male-law-makers' and silences women's political struggles, enables hegemonic ideologies and the patriarchal system within the United States (Douglas, 2013).

Beyond that, the media consistently fail to explore and reveal the multiplicity of experiences of women from different age, race, and socio-economic classes (Bone and Meyers-Bass, 2010). In her study, DaoJensen (2013), unpicks the mainstream media attention afforded to Bristol Palin - the daughter of Republican presidential candidate John McCain's vice-presidential running mate, Sarah Palin - and her teenage pregnancy and single motherhood as a demonstration of what she sees as a postfeminist and neoliberal media culture. Palin was celebrated by the media for her choice to follow through with her pregnancy, but the media failed to address the fact that as a white, upper middle-class woman, her experiences differ greatly to that of the realities faced by other women. While the discourses espoused by the media did not acknowledge 'any idea of the individual as subject to pressures, constraints, or influence from outside themselves' (DaoJensen, 2013: 610) they instead adopted the language of choice in so far as they determined that there is one right and one wrong choice when it comes to pregnancy, the right choice being the decision to embrace motherhood. Similarly,

Douglas and Michaels (2004), argue that the media have relentlessly developed what they call the 'new momism' - ideals, norms and values which acknowledge motherhood as not only a choice, but rather the only truly fulfilling choice a woman can make.

Along those lines, Palczewski (2010) considers media coverage of the two different terms of 'choice' and 'reproductive freedom.' Mainstream media discussed the two terms in either one of two ways: (1) as synonymous and interchangeable terms relating to the struggle for female reproductive rights, or (2) as a strategic effort to challenge pro-life activists (Palczewski, 2010). Both coverage is problematic because it ignores the complex history of the language of 'reproductive freedom,' the experiences of women of color and poor women who fought for its introduction to public discourse, and the comprehensive demands with which it relates.

### **3.1.5 ALTERNATIVE MEDIA**

With the above limitations of mainstream media in mind, alternative media - media which differ from the mainstream in content, production, or distribution - offer an opportunity to question and challenge dominant power structures in society (Fuchs, 2010) through the articulation of ideologies that are either dismissed or distorted by the mainstream media channels (Bailey, Cammarts and Carpentier, 2007). According to Fuchs (2010), counter-publics are inextricably tied to emancipatory struggles against systems of domination, and thus rely on alternative media to initiate large-scale political discourse. Broad political communication on an issue, he determines, is crucial to ultimately achieve social transformation (Fuchs, 2010). While the counter-public may function as a site for marginalized groups to deliberate beyond the public sphere, the oscillation of counter-discourse outward, to beyond the counter-public, is central to the struggle against the hegemony. An enclaved counter-public that does not engage with outside participants is unable to effectively challenge hegemonic ideologies (Palczewski, 2010).

Alternative media, and specifically the critical traits of alternative media, can demonstrate social failures, reveal opportunities for social change, and bring forth public debate (Fuchs, 2010). Critical 'content expresses oppositional standpoints that question all forms of heteronomy and domination... [and] includes the voices of the excluded, the oppressed, the dominated, the enslaved, the estranged, the exploited' (Fuchs, 2010: 180). Therefore, alternative media produce public information and communication from beyond the state, information, and cultural monopolies which consistently silence these marginalized groups. Additionally, alternative media is anti-authoritarian in nature, and presents an opportunity to level the 'hierarchy of access' found in mainstream media (Atton, 2002). 'Mainstream media tend to be oriented towards different types of elites, as is the case, for instance, in mainstream

news broadcasts favouring government sources' (Bailey, Cammarts and Carpentier, 2007: 20). Alternative media is designed to combat this phenomenon by providing a space for marginalized groups to break the barriers set by the government, the mainstream media, and other dominant institutions (Atton, 2002). As a result, diverse content can be produced which challenges the hegemonic ideologies set by society's dominant cultures.

### 3.1.6 HUMOR AND POWER IN POLITICAL SATIRE

Democratic systems leave marginalized groups with little opportunity to influence those in power without garnering widespread support from the general public through media attention, but, as outlined, the mainstream media work in favor of society's dominant forces, so counter-publics turn to alternative media to resist the hegemony. However, as Jørgen Johansen (1991) explains,

*one of the few topics of interest in the media, besides sex and violence, is entertainment... Could radical political questions create the same interest as conventional entertainment... Could information be spread and a debate started by getting people to laugh at the crazy system' (Johansen, 1991: 26).*

The language and discursive strategies employed by counter-publics are critical to the proliferation of counter-discourses (Bone, 2010), and, according to Johansen (1991), humor can be used as a tool to spread the messages of minority and nontraditional voices who are systematically silenced by the hegemony and mainstream media.

Dagnes (2012) considers why humorists are rarely politically conservative, and argues that humor is anti-authoritarian in nature, and has the potential to expose abuses of power, the limitations of politicians and political systems, and to demonstrate societal shortcomings. Through the use of political satire - drawing entertainment from politics and political institutions - humorists offer a critique of the vices and follies of socio-political life (Hill, 2013). To produce political satire, humorists engage with society's hegemonic ideologies to then undermine them by exploiting their vulnerabilities, thus supporting counter-discourses that encourage re-conceptualizations of the status-quo (Hill, 2013). Additionally, political satire draws on humor as a weapon to question institutional power structures by offering alternative perspectives that expose societal problems, incongruity, and absurdity (Hill, 2013). While political satire can be presented in a number of different comedic genres, this study is particularly concerned with political satire in stand-up comedy.

### 3.1.7 STAND-UP COMEDY

*There's a lot of people right now who say that stand-up comedians should just stick to comedy, and not talk about anything else. I disagree. I think that stand-up comedy doesn't always have to be funny. Stand-up comedy doesn't always have to be entertaining. Sometimes, it's about speaking truth to power. Sometimes, it's about pointing out wrongs in the world, even though it might not be popular (Appendix 1: 3).*

Stand-up comedy is a performance by a single comedian who, while standing on-stage, presents original material in the form of a series of jokes or 'bits' (Kiesalo, 2018). While stand-up comedians often perform jokes as though they are true and autobiographical stories, the narratives are usually exaggerated, distorted, or fabricated to expose social critiques (Highet, 1962). However, whereas in mainstream news journalism such distortions of information perpetuate societal power imbalances, comedians do not suppose to present unbiased objective information to the audience (Dagnes, 2012). The comedian carefully develops jokes tailored to specific audiences and situations (Gilbert, 1997), and rely on messaging techniques that range from

*one-liners, verbal games involving puns, malapropisms, double-entendres, and the violation of socially acceptable language taboos to physical and prop comedy, insult comedy, parodies and put-downs of current popular culture, and of course social and political criticism (Mintz, 1985: 78).*

Stage personas can be integral to the stand-up comedian's messaging, and creates an environment 'where various perspectives can be expressed, imagined, played with, and criticized' (Keisalo, 2018: 117).

While stand-up comedy sits comfortably in the social realm of entertainment, it also provides an important political function as social commentary and critique, revealing societal and cultural 'values, attitudes, dispositions, and concerns' (Mintz, 1985: 71). When stand-up comedians comment on societal short-comings they often do so in ways that are provocative and would ordinarily be seen as inappropriate (Antoine, 2016). However, stand-up comedians are exempted, to a degree, from socially constructed behavior conventions, and are, therefore, allowed a greater amount of deviate behavior than is typically deemed socially acceptable (Mintz, 1985). As a result, while dominant cultures will suppress attempts to challenge the

hegemony, stand-up comedians have some freedom to perform marginality, deviate behavior, flawed characterizations, and socially unacceptable lived experiences.

Stand-up comedians often work their identities - whether racial, gender, economic class, sexual orientation, or otherwise - into their material (Antoine, 2016). How comedians introduce these identities to the audience '(through joke topic and content, physical appearance, attire, speech pattern, et cetera) may or may not push the edges of hegemonic discourses of race and gender' (Antoine, 2016: 36). In looking specifically at gender identities, Butler (1999) argues that when expected identities - hegemonic ideas of what those identities should look like - are not repeated and reaffirmed through on-going repetition, a discursive gap is revealed. This discursive gap, she argues, can act as a potential site of social transformation. So, when stand-up comedians perform identities that differ from those constructed by the dominant culture, they create discursive gaps that challenge societal expectations and the hegemony. Antoine (2016) argues that stand-up comedians use the tension between the expected and the unexpected to participate in a social phenomenon where they 'push the edge' of discourses by interacting with hegemonic ideologies from a marginal perspective (Antoine, 2016). By introducing language which coheres with expected discourses of the mainstream hegemonic ideologies immediately followed by unexpected discourses that challenge those hegemonic ideologies, stand-up comedians create a space of social critique (Antoine, 2016). This is a discursive technique often used by comedians as it exposes the audience's inherent assumptions and expectations. Standup comedy, therefore, is subversive in its ability to play with and distort societal expectations of expression and behavior (Mintz, 1985).

### 3.2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

While feminism as a social, political, and ideological movement evolves with time in terms of form and aims, reproductive autonomy has always been central to the unwavering feminist goal of women's empowerment (Bute *et al*, 2010: 51). Feminist theory is a useful framework for this analysis as it offers a critique not only of gender and gendered power in discourse, but also the power relations of race, class, and sexuality (Cuklanz, 2016: 1).

*Only by attending to, instead of negating 'difference', can feminists identify and theorize more accurately the commonalities of gender oppression, and build alliances among women in tackling specific issues and achieving concrete political goals (Lazar, 2005: 17).*

As a result, with a goal of social justice for *all* women, feminist theory seeks to consider the differences in the ways in which gender hierarchies are expressed and discursively enacted among women depending, in part, upon their complex identities (Lazar, 2005).

Additionally, poststructuralist feminism will be used to guide this study. Poststructuralist feminism is grounded in the belief that discourses create social constructions of identities that come to be recognized as 'normal, natural, and often incontestable' (Bute *et al*, 2010: 52). Traits and conceptions of gender are social constructions that are negotiated and defined through everyday practices and interaction (Poggio, 2006). Engaging with normative gender characteristics through everyday practice may reinforce dominant conceptions of gender roles, but a failure to comply with those gender characteristics can challenge attitudes towards gender categorizations (Poggio, 2006). With that in mind, poststructuralist feminism seeks to critically analyze the construction and ordering of gender hierarchies and identities (Poggio, 2006). Central to poststructuralist feminism is a focus on the study of systems of power and how those systems shape personal experiences and everyday lives. While 'the personal is political, meaning, among other things, that personal experience is inescapably social, and social experience is inescapably political' (Bute *et al*, 2010: 53), it is essential not to disconnect individual experiences from institutional systems of power as sources of marginalization. Instead, personal experiences and the storying of those lived experiences should be traced to the complex narrative landscapes that legitimize and perpetuate hegemonic ideologies (Bute *et al*, 2010). While it is individuals and their everyday interactions that construct, legitimate, or challenge gender norms, the individual and the individual's actions exist within this system of power relations (West and Zimmerman, 1987).

### 3.2.1 RESEARCH AIMS

This study will build on the literature and concepts as mentioned above by locating discourse on the issue of female reproductive rights in stand-up comedy. The research seeks to identify the discursive techniques utilized by stand-up comedians to understand how those techniques challenge patriarchal systems and hegemonic femininity. Recent efforts to restrict female reproductive autonomy in the United States hinge on pronatalist discourse that legitimizes hegemonic femininity and places motherhood as women's sole role in society. As such, this research has significant topical relevance as it endeavors to locate discursive techniques to challenge the language which threatens women's reproductive freedom.

### 3.2.2 RESEARCH QUESTION

This dissertation seeks to answer the question:

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What are the ways in which contemporary stand-up comedy challenges hegemonic femininity in the context of female reproductive rights in the United States?

## **4 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

This study was carefully developed with the above mentioned research aims and question in mind. This chapter outlines the steps taken throughout the research process and explains decisions regarding sample selection and methodological approach.

### **4.1 RESEARCH DESIGN**

#### **4.1.1 SAMPLE SELECTION**

Pre-recorded stand-up material was chosen as the most manageable form of stand-up comedy for this analysis. While live stand-up shows would have likely been a fruitful area of study, many stand-up comedians do not allow their shows to be recorded or filmed as they often perform the same material at various locations (Corley, 2019). To ensure an in-depth study of stand-up material, it was determined that access to content which could either be recorded or repeatedly referred to was essential for a comprehensive analysis of how comedians use the genre through the messaging that they produce. As a result, pre-recorded stand-up material available on streaming sites was selected for purposes of convenience. The sample selection of three comedians and their accompanying comedic content was determined based on the similarities and differences in content format. While, interestingly, many stand-up comedians briefly mentioned abortion or women's reproductive rights in recent sets across streaming sites, the comedians selected for this study dedicated either the entirety or a significant portion of their set to the matter. This content, rather than comedy that merely mentions abortion or female reproductive rights in passing, is more conducive to an in-depth analysis of systems of power, gendered and otherwise, addressed in stand-up comedy about women's reproductive freedom. Each of the selected stand-up specials were released within a few months of each other, and around the same time - the beginning of 2019 - as the recent government efforts to restrict women's reproductive freedom in the United States. Since this research question specifically asks how stand-up comedians challenge hegemonic femininity through their content, one comedian was selected from three different stand-up formats: the stand-up special album, Comedy Central stand-up, and the Netflix stand-up special. Each format varies in the discursive techniques available to the comedian, so an analysis comparing and contrasting content will provide interesting insights into how comedians use stand-up comedy as a platform. That said, while each format varies slightly, they all adhere to the traditional stand-up format of one comedian speaking directly to an audience who may interact with the comedian and the comedian's content through laughter and cajoling (Mintz, 1985). Each are outlined below.

#### 4.1.2 THE STAND-UP SPECIAL ALBUM

While the other stand-up formats include a filmed audio-visual recording of the comedian's performance, the stand-up special album is different in its near exclusive focus on audio recorded comedy. Instead of *watching* the stand-up performance, the streaming audience *listens* to the performance. The original stand-up material is still performed in front of a live audience, but instead of making the filmed content available for wider public consumption, the stand-up special album only uploads audio recorded content to streaming sites. As a result, the primary visual element of the stand-up special album is in the album cover. An additional feature unique to the stand-up special album is that each bit performed is separated, much in the format of songs in a musical album, and given a title. While listeners can play the stand-up album from beginning to end and it flows similar to how a live stand-up performance would, listeners can also choose to play specific bits within the set.

##### ***Abortion. Abortion. Abortion., Emma Arnold***

Emma Arnold is an American comedian from Idaho (Emmaarnoldcomedy.com, 2019). Her most recent stand-up special, *Abortion. Abortion. Abortion.* was performed in Boise, Idaho, and released on March 22, 2019. *Abortion. Abortion. Abortion.* details Arnold's experiences as a single mother of three, the state of politics in Idaho, her recent sexual relationships with women, and, perhaps unsurprisingly, abortion (Appendix 1: 1). Released in album format on Spotify, iTunes, Google Play, and Amazon (Emmaarnoldcomedy.com, 2019), *Abortion. Abortion. Abortion.* is broken up into fifteen bits, four of which directly address the issue of abortion and female reproductive rights. These four bits are titled; *My Diagnosis*, *One-Issue Voter*, *Not Pro-Choice*, and *Abortion or Cancer* (Appendix 1: 1).

#### 4.1.3 COMEDY CENTRAL STAND-UP FEATURING

Comedy Central is an American television channel which is owned by Viacom Global Entertainment Group. Comedy Central specializes in a range of comedic content including film, late-night, and stand-up comedy. The Comedy Central Stand-Up Featuring series is specifically focused on stand-up comedy and is geared towards providing 'today's freshest young comedians...[and] up-and-coming comics' (Comedy Central, n.d.) a platform to showcase their comedy. The Comedy Central Stand-Up Featuring sets are typically around 15 minutes in length.

##### ***When Planned Parenthood's Lobby Plays 'Cheaper by the Dozen', Clare O'Kane***

Self-identifying as 'a Queer, Feminist, Mixed Race, Woman' (O'Kane, 2014), Clare O'Kane is an actor, comedian, and writer from San Jose, California (clareokane.com, 2018). Her recent

Comedy Central Stand-Up Featuring performance was released on February 7, 2019, and performed in Brooklyn. In it, O’Kane outlines her sex life, her own experiences with Planned Parenthood, and what she wishes she had known before getting an abortion (Appendix 1: 2).

#### 4.1.4 NETFLIX STAND-UP SPECIAL

Netflix is an online subscription-based media provider that is known for distributing films, TV shows, documentaries, and original comedy specials (Netflix.com, 2019). Netflix stand-up specials are roughly one hour in length and are performed by high-profile established comedians. Netflix stand-up specials often include a short introductory clip which accompanies the stand-up for those members of the audience watching the special from the streaming site. Additionally, Netflix stand-up specials are well-known for their high production quality and massive audiences (Zinoman, 2019).

##### *Fire in the Maternity Ward, Anthony Jeselnik*

Anthony Jeselnik is an American comedian, actor, writer, and producer from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He is known for his arrogant and misogynistic stage persona and his dark, deadpan comedic style (Anthonyjeselnik.com, 2019). His recent Netflix special, *Fire in the Maternity Ward*, was released on April 30, 2019, and performed in New York. In it, Jeselnik addresses topics rarely discussed in comedy routines, including murder-suicide, dementia, and family deaths. *Fire in the Maternity Ward* ends with a fifteen-minute bit where Jeselnik details his experience taking his friend, Jessica, to get an abortion (Appendix 1: 3).

## 4.2 ETHICS AND REFLEXIVITY

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethics review guidelines as outlined by the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). An ethics review form was signed by the appointed dissertation supervisor and submitted by the researcher. Having determined that the LSE does not have a standardized Harvard referencing guide, at the recommendation of the LSE’s Academic Support Librarians, this study - all in-text academic references and reference list formatting - follows the Harvard System of Referencing as outlined by Anglia Ruskin University (Anglia Ruskin University Library, 2019). No ethical concerns arose from the completion of this research, that said, concerns with regard to the researcher’s reflexivity are presented and addressed below.

As a woman from the United States, this topic is of unique and personal relevance to me. Politically speaking, I am liberal and resoundingly in support of female reproductive freedom. While this research may be susceptible to claims of political bias, in contextualizing the

research from a feminist perspective, I do not seek to hide or deny any potential bias. In fact, as this study will show, I reject the neutrality and innocence of language and recognize that knowledge is socially and historically constructed (Lazar, 2005). This study follows that tradition and hopes, by adopting a feminist critique of discourses and their interactions with patriarchal social order, to demonstrate the discursive techniques that can be used to challenge the status quo, and ultimately contribute to social change.

### **4.3 METHODOLOGY**

Discourse is a powerful tool that can be used to espouse world views. As such, the qualitative research approach of discourse analysis will be used to answer the research question: What are the ways in which contemporary stand-up comedy challenges hegemonic femininity in the context of female reproductive rights in the United States?

While there are many methodological approaches to the study of discourse, all share the belief that language is not merely a neutral tool used to describe the world, but is, instead, a central means through which social life is constructed (Gill, 1996). 'People use discourse in order to *do* things: to offer blame, to make excuses, to present themselves in a positive light' (Gill, 1996: 142, emphasis in original). So, the purpose of discourse analysis is to critically analyze discursive techniques to reveal the presence of, and the relationship between, power structures. However, since the same text can produce different readings, discourse analysis is simply the researcher's interpretative attempt to make sense of the discourse being studied (Gill, 1996). As such, discourse analysis affords the researcher a high level of freedom in both interpretation and methodological development. Initially, a mixed methodological approach of critical discourse analysis and multimodal discourse analysis seemed appropriate for this study. Comedians engage with a diversity of communicative techniques - language, gestures, intonations, and facial expressions among others (Oliar and Sprigman, 2008) - and multimodal discourse analysis would support an in-depth critique of the bodily communicative techniques employed by stand-up comedians. However, having started the process of operationalizing this research, considering the limited scope of this study and the wealth of linguistic techniques employed by stand-up comedians, it was ultimately determined that a singular methodological approach of critical discourse analysis would be used to provide a comprehensive critique of the sampled material.

#### **4.3.1 CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS (CDA)**

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a multi-disciplinary and multi-methodological approach that is primarily concerned with the everyday expression, constitution, and legitimization of ideology and power within discourse (Wodak and Meyer, 2008). Central to CDA is the

understanding that discourse is a social phenomenon and can, therefore, be used to analyze the use of language for purposes of social 'dominance, discrimination, power and control' (Wodak and Meyer, 2008: 11). While discourse may be used by dominant social groups to suppress marginalized voices, it can also be used by those marginalized to strategically and discursively resist such social domination (Wodak and Meyer, 2008). Since this study is conceptualized from a feminist perspective, it is crucial to pay particular attention to 'how gender ideology and gendered relations of power are (re)produced, negotiated and contested' through language (Lazar, 2005: 12). Simultaneously, however, this study will consider the multiplicity of forms of oppression and interests which divide and unite women (Lazar, 2005).

After undertaking critical readings of each of the sampled material, the discursive techniques of 'pushing the edge' of hegemonic femininity by interrogating latent assumptions, and the gendering or non-gendering of discourse were selected as crucial tools utilized by each comedian to challenge hegemonic femininity, and the samples were coded accordingly. These two discursive techniques will be briefly outlined below.

1. *'Pushing the edge' of hegemonic femininity* - As conceptualized by Antoine (2016), the 'edge' of hegemonic ideologies is the outer boundary of mainstream discourse. By engaging with mainstream discourse and exposing it to social critique, the comedian is able to push the boundaries of the mainstream and open it up to broader conceptualizations. Since this study is specifically concerned with the issue of female reproductive rights, coding focused on instances where comedians engaged with mainstream discourses which threaten women's reproductive autonomy to then expose such discourse to critique.
2. *Gendering or non-gendering of discourse* - Gender and gender norms are socially constructed through everyday life, so, the ways in which gender is embedded in text can either contribute to the production of those norms or challenge them (West and Zimmerman, 1987). The U.S. hegemonic discourses of femininity establish a set of limited behavior and identity conventions for women. Through the inclusion or exclusion of gender in their sets, comedians can challenge those conventions by presenting alternative perspectives.

#### 4.3.2 LIMITATIONS OF METHODOLOGY

The primary limitation of a qualitative approach to research, such as this, is the interpretative nature of the analysis and the likelihood of a biased reading of the content in question (Morgan, 2010). Questions of bias will be addressed by beginning the study from a textual analysis to reveal findings which will then be interpreted against the broader socio-political

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context. In other words, this study did not set out to analyze the discursive techniques of 'pushing the edge' of hegemonic discourses through interrogating assumptions and the gendering or non-gendering of discourse. Instead, those phenomena emerged as powerful tools utilized by the comedians as the project developed. This will defend against arguments that through CDA, researchers 'find what they expect to find, whether it is absences or presences' (Stubbs, 1997: 2014).

## 5 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter will be used to interpret results from the critical discourse analysis conducted on selected material to answer the question: What are the ways in which contemporary stand-up comedy challenges hegemonic femininity in the context of female reproductive rights in the United States?

This chapter considers the differences and similarities between the comedic content and locates two primary discursive techniques used by the stand-up comedians to challenge hegemonic femininity: ‘pushing the edge’ of hegemonic femininity by interrogating latent assumptions and the gendering or non-gendering of discourse. Beginning with an in-depth interpretation of the sampled content, this chapter will end by situating the findings within a feminist framework to discuss its implications.

### 5.1 RESULTS

#### 5.1.1 ‘PUSHING THE EDGE’ OF HEGEMONIC FEMININITY BY INTERROGATING ASSUMPTIONS

As outlined by Antoine (2016), when ‘pushing the edge’ of hegemonic ideologies, stand-up comedians structure jokes in a way that initially engages with expected mainstream discourses from the dominant societal power structures only to violate those discourses and force the audience to interrogate their expectations and inherent assumptions. Exposing assumptions and latent expectations simultaneously make visible, and problematizes, the power structures responsible for constructing dominant ideologies. The discourses that threaten women’s reproductive freedom hinge on pronatalist ideology and hegemonic femininity and are products of the patriarchal system dominating the United States. By challenging these discourses, stand-up comedians challenge the ideologies which support them. This method was employed by each of the three comedians and is critically analyzed below.

#### **EMMA ARNOLD, *Abortion. Abortion. Abortion.***

*A lot of the times people after a show... somebody will come up and be like, ‘I don’t really have a problem with abortion, per se. But I really have a problem with my tax dollars going to pay for people’s good time. Which, that’s fine. That’s your opinion, but I want to be really clear where I stand on that issue, politically. And that is, I am 100% okay with my tax dollars going to pay for your good time (Appendix 1: 1).*

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Arnold engages with conservative rhetoric threatening the federal funding of Planned Parenthood and other family planning organizations in her bit, *One-Issue Voter*. A one-issue voter makes voting decisions based on a candidate's stance on a single issue. The name of her stand-up special, *Abortion. Abortion. Abortion.*, and statements made in her performance earlier in the bit - 'I feel like abortion is a human right' (ibid) - indicate to the audience that abortion is the issue with which Arnold makes her voting decisions. She also indicates that 'a lot' (ibid) of her audience members disagree with her on this issue and support the defunding of Planned Parenthood and other family planning organizations. As explained by Arnold, those in support of defunding Planned Parenthood often claim that tax-payer dollars are 'going to pay for people's good time' (ibid). She structures the joke as though she is going to rebuff that line of reasoning through her statement: 'That's your opinion, but I want to be really clear where I stand on that issue, politically' (ibid). Instead of rejecting the claim that Planned Parenthood funds and encourages sexuality, she leans into it: 'I am 100% okay with my tax dollars going to pay for your good time' (ibid). Arnold repeats this sentiment at the end of her bit:

*I think we've gotten real off track as a country, and I think, what if instead of corporate bailouts and wars we don't want to be in, what if we start spending all of our money, as a country, on the female orgasm. Why don't we be the country that finds the clit forever, huh! What about that! USA! USA! USA! I thought more people would chime in on that, but you people hate the clitoris, so that's cool. No, that's fun. That's fun (ibid).*

Arnold begins by acknowledging that she and the audience share a similar frustration - the government's poor use of tax-payer dollars. However, she deviates from expected lines of reasoning by then stating that she believes the United States government should spend all of the country's money 'on the female orgasm' (ibid). Again, here she is talking about female reproductive rights and abortion, but conflates the issue to simply a matter of female sexuality, just as the audience member in her narrative does when they say 'I really have a problem with my tax dollars going to pay for people's good time' (Appendix 1: 1). She also repeats her inference that many of the members of her audience support defunding family planning organizations when she states, 'you people hate the clitoris' (ibid). Two things happen here: (1) it exposes to critique a common argument used by conservative groups seeking to defund Planned Parenthood and other family planning organizations, and (2) it invites the audience to question why female sexuality is negatively positioned in society.

**CLARE O'KANE, *When Planned Parenthood's Lobby Plays 'Cheaper by the Dozen'***

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*I found out after the fact. I found this out after the procedge that if you want, you can play any song you want during the procedge. Oh. Any song you want. It's a five-minute procedure. That's it, so you can't play Free Bird or whatever. There's a sign that says no Free Bird, and I was like, 'Fuck, I wish I had known this before ahead of time' (Appendix 1: 2).*

Having told her audience that she recently had an abortion at Planned Parenthood, O'Kane engages with the rhetoric of informed consent when stating, 'I found out after the fact. I found out after the procedge' (ibid). At a basic level, informed consent is meant to ensure that women are well informed about abortions prior to deciding to follow through with the procedure, but it is highly politicized (Roberti, 2017). As a result, misconceptions that women have regrets after they get an abortion are used by lawmakers who seek to limit women's reproductive freedom through informed consent and restrictive abortion laws (Mollen, 2014). Having structured the joke to set the frame of informed consent, and a potential narrative of regret, O'Kane shatters it by stating, 'you can play any song you want during the procedge' (Appendix 1: 2). O'Kane indicates that she does have regrets about the abortion, which she emphasizes with: 'Fuck, I wish I had known this before' (ibid). Only, it is not the abortion that she regrets. She mocks the language of informed consent and invites the audience to interrogate assumptions that women regret abortions.

### **ANTHONY JESELNIK, *Fire in the Maternity Ward***

*I did just say I am pro-choice. That does not mean I am pro-abortion. You have other options. If you don't want your baby, you can still have your baby delivered. Leave it outside any fire station in the country...they will run it over for you (Appendix 1: 3).*

By introducing a narrative that follows standard anti-abortion language conventions (e.g., 'I am pro-choice. That does not mean I am pro-abortion. You have other options' (Appendix 1: 3) and then ending the narrative in a way that completely violates those conventions (e.g., 'Leave it outside any fire station in the country...they will run it over for you' (ibid)) Jeselnik invites his audience to question their latent expectations by failing to meet them. Central to the anti-abortion debate is the argument that women with unwanted pregnancies have options beyond abortion; namely, motherhood or adoption. Instead of pursuing this line of argument, Jeselnik plays on the rhetoric by allowing the audience to *assume* that he will follow it. Safe Haven Laws, present in all 50 states, allow parents to leave their unwanted newborn babies in designated safe locations - hospitals, churches, fire stations - without being asked any

questions or charged for child abandonment. The law is meant to prevent unwanted babies from being left in dangerous locations such as dumpsters (Family.findlaws.com, n.d.). Through this joke, Jeselnik forces his audience to interrogate the assumption integral to the anti-abortion rhetoric that carrying an unwanted pregnancy to term is indeed a 'safe' and preferable option to abortion.

### 5.1.2 GENDERING OR NON-GENDERING OF DISCOURSE

Acknowledging that ideology is produced and maintained through language, deviations from ideological norms are potential sites of resistance against the hegemony. Gender and gender norms are similarly constructed through 'psychological, cultural, and social means' (West and Zimmerman, 1987: 125). The use of gender in language is a seemingly innocuous discursive technique, but since language is not neutral or innocent (Lazar, 2005), the use, or non-use, of gender is an exercise of power. As a result, how comedians employ gender within their sets can reinforce gender norms or challenge them. Each of the three comedians used gender to challenge hegemonic behavior and identity norms as constructed by the patriarchal system dominating the United States.

#### **EMMA ARNOLD, *Abortion. Abortion. Abortion.***

In *My Diagnosis*, Arnold explains that her gynecologist found a couple of lumps on her left ovary and told her that they were either 'cancer or a teratoma' (Appendix 1: 1). Since, as she explains, she does not have great health insurance, Arnold goes to Planned Parenthood to have the lumps checked out. However, on her way into Planned Parenthood, she encounters a protestor.

*He ran right over to the line that they can't cross and he started screaming 'Don't kill your baby, don't kill your baby, God has a plan for you.' And I was like... Holy fuck. Maybe he's right (Appendix 1: 1, emphasis added).*

In this narrative, the protestor is male and assumes that Arnold is pregnant, that she is going to Planned Parenthood to get an abortion, and that he knows what is best for her. She exposes how ridiculous these assumptions are when she says: 'Maybe he's right' (ibid). Planned Parenthood offers a myriad of services beyond abortion including sex education, 'contraception, testing and treatment for sexually transmitted infections (STIs), [and] lifesaving cancer screenings' to their 5,800,000 annual patients (Planned Parenthood, 2019). Arnold invites a critique of the male protestor's supposed unawareness or uninterest with regards to the life-saving health care services beyond abortion that Planned Parenthood

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provides, which also supports a broader critique of governmental efforts to defund Planned Parenthood and other family planning organizations. Arnold further develops her thoughts on male opinions about abortion in her next bit, *One-Issue Voter*.

*If you're a woman and you are anti-choice, we don't have to argue about it. I respect your feelings, I respect your opinion, we don't ever have to talk about it. We can just live on opposite sides. If you're a man, and you have an opinion about abortion, you can go slam your dick in a drawer (Appendix 1: 1, emphasis added).*

Here, Arnold acknowledges differences among women and their beliefs. Instead of arguing that their opinions are wrong because they are different from hers, she states that she 'respects' (ibid) them. However, she does label the opposing stance as 'anti-choice' (ibid) rather than pro-life, which is typically the preferred moniker of those opposing abortion. At the same time, Arnold rejects male opinions about abortions. She does not, at any point, differentiate between men who oppose or support female reproductive freedom. Instead, she develops this bit by indicating that men do not have the right to talk about abortion because they are incapable of understanding the issue unless they slam their 'dick in a drawer 795 times' (ibid) and then they 'get to talk to one woman, one time about abortion' (ibid).

Arnold continues to use the gendering of discourse when she attributes genders to her teratomas, by naming them after President Donald Trump and his son, Donald Jr.

*Maybe I shouldn't be so quick to go and Mellon ball out little Donny and Donny Jr. down here (Appendix 1: 1, emphasis added).*

In effect, Arnold draws parallels between the male politicians threatening women's reproductive freedom and the tumors that quite literally threaten her own individual reproductive health.

### **CLARE O'KANE, *When Planned Parenthood's Lobby Plays 'Cheaper by the Dozen'***

*As a woman... Uh-oh. Oh, boy, here she goes. As a woman, I enjoy going to PP. I love PP. I love to go PP on the weekdays. I love PP in the afternoon. I looove PP, Planned Parenthood. I love Planned Parenthood (Appendix 1: 2, emphasis added).*

O'Kane introduces her set by assuming gender biases within her audience. Having stated that she is 'a woman' (ibid), she then impersonates her audience when she says, 'Uh-oh. Oh, boy,

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here she goes' (ibid), assuming that they expect particular things from her comedy because she is, 'a woman' (ibid). In a 2016 interview, O'Kane expressed her frustration with repeatedly being identified before sets as a 'female comedian.' As she explains, by telling an audience that a comedian is 'a woman' what they're really being told is: "Hey so this next comedian is a WOMAN, so now you know what to expect! Period jokes and shit!" (Fisher, 2016). O'Kane plays on this gender bias and challenges her audience to think beyond it.

However, O'Kane also employs the use of non-gendering discourse in her comedy. In the following excerpt, O'Kane refers to a trip to Planned Parenthood and her interactions with the doctor she sees.

*So, I go into the doctor's office and the doctor says, 'What's the problem?' And, I go, 'Well doc, I got this sort of like flesh colored bump, I want to say.' And the doctor stops me, and they go, 'Flesh colored? Wow. Cool. Can I just ask you a quick question? Did you go to medical school by any chance?' And I go, 'No, why?' And they go, 'Cuz that's exactly the terminology we use in medical school. It's in the book.' Sick (Appendix 1: 2, emphasis added).*

O'Kane does not attribute binary gender pronouns to the doctor in this narrative. Divisions of labor are often gendered, and the profession of doctor is firmly positioned as masculine. 'Many roles are already gender marked, so that special qualifiers - such as 'female doctor' or 'male nurse' - must be added to exceptions to the rule' (West and Zimmerman, 1987: 129). However, in this scenario, the doctor is not *necessarily* an exception to the rule. By failing to refer to the doctor as male or female with pronouns of 'he' or 'she,' and instead using 'they' (Appendix 1: 2), O'Kane forces the audience to engage with their own gender biases. Does the audience member unconsciously imagine that the doctor in this scenario is male or female?

### **ANTHONY JESELNIK, *Fire in the Maternity Ward***

*I am chuckling to myself ...in the waiting room ...of an abortion clinic. I catch myself, I stop, I look up. I see a couple sitting straight across from me. The guy looks away in disgust like he wants to fight me. But the woman leans forward and goes, 'Hey, Anthony, big fan.' Which I always appreciate. Never a bad time for that. Literally...any trimester is good (Appendix 1: 3, emphasis added).*

Jeselnik challenges mainstream sexist generalizations that 'due to their kind hearts... very few... [women] have ever written, or even enjoyed, satire, although they have often been its

victims' (Highet, 1962: 235). Instead, he positions the man in this scenario as the one offended by his jokes and unable to appreciate his satire. However, at the very end of his show, he reverts back to mainstream discourse that women cannot take a joke.

*My favorite reaction I've ever gotten from this story was just a couple of weeks ago. A woman in the back of the theater stands up very confidently and she screams out, 'Excuse me. Excuse me, Anthony, but what the fuck is so funny about abortion?' And I said, 'Lady, I just told you' (Appendix 1: 3, emphasis added)*

Jeselnik does not indicate where this audience member stands politically. With the information given, she could just as easily oppose female reproductive rights as she could support it. However, what he does is challenge any efforts to attribute homogenous gender norms across his comedy set. *Some* women can take a joke just as *some* men can take a joke, similarly, *some* women can be offended by a joke just as *some* men can be offended by a joke. Based on this narrative, one cannot attribute sweeping behavior categorizations depending on gender.

## 5.2 DISCUSSION

The results of this analysis demonstrated that contemporary stand-up comedians utilized the discursive techniques of 'pushing the edge' to interrogate latent assumptions and the gendering or non-gendering of discourse to challenge hegemonic femininity. Recent state and federal efforts in the United States to restrict female reproductive autonomy hinge on discourse established by patriarchal systems that legitimize hegemonic femininity. As a result, by calling into question discourses which seek to limit female reproductive freedom, these stand-up comedians expose to critique patriarchal systems of power. However, these results led to a number of additional implications and considerations which must be addressed below.

### 5.2.1 IMPLICATIONS

Stand-up comedy offers a unique space for personal experiences of social domination to be demonstrated and critiqued. Systems of power shape personal experience, identities, and everyday life (West and Zimmerman, 1987) and since stand-up comedians often perform jokes as though they are true and autobiographical in nature, they expose individual narratives of domination as enacted by institutional systems of power (Highet, 1962). The storying of these experiences must be critically analyzed in relation to the systems of power which legitimize and perpetuate hegemonic ideologies (Bute *et al*, 2010). In this case, narratives exposing personal experiences of suppression through the restriction of female reproductive freedom must be considered in relation to the patriarchal socio-political system that constructs U.S.

hegemonic discourses of femininity. Alternative media, and stand-up comedy specifically, are vital to the dissemination of these counter-discourses into broader political communication beyond the counter-publics from which they originate. In addition to exposing that the personal is political, stand-up comedy challenges patriarchal systems of power through two discursive techniques identified in this study: 'pushing the edge' to challenge hegemonic femininity and the gendering or non-gendering of discourse.

Counter-discourse, particularly counter-discourse through political satire, is designed to undermine the hegemony by highlighting socio-political vulnerabilities and offering alternate perspectives to the status-quo (Hill, 2013). By 'pushing the edge' of hegemonic ideologies, comedians are able to expose latent expectations and assumptions that permeate society and contribute to establishing the status quo (Antoine, 2016). This study focused on the issue of female reproductive freedom and considers how comedians engage with dominant ideologies to ultimately expose them to critique. Recent efforts in the United States to limit female reproductive freedom hinge on pronatalist discourse that legitimizes hegemonic femininity, and is a product of the patriarchal socio-political climate. By engaging with the discourses used by those seeking to limit female reproductive freedom – defund planned parenthood because it encourages female sexuality; informed consent is necessary because women do not know what they are doing when they get abortions; one can be pro-choice *and* anti-abortion because women have other options beyond abortion – stand-up comedians invite audiences to consider the absurdities inherent in each.

Discourses are central to the creation of social constructions of identities and help to define what is considered 'normal, natural, & often incontestable' (Bute *et al*, 2010). When expected identities – hegemonic ideas of what identities should look like – are not repeated, those expected identities are opened up to critique (Butler, 1999). By engaging with gender in their comedy sets, Arnold, Jeselnik, and O'Kane toy with the social construction of gender identities. As a result, they offer alternative perspectives of gender categorizations and invite the audience to question the patriarchal system that comes to establish normative and limiting conceptions of societal gender roles. All three comedians challenge hegemonic femininity by calling into question overarching categorizations that attempt to define gender along specific and delineating characteristics as determined by the dominant culture.

### **5.2.2 CONSIDERATIONS AND LIMITATIONS OF STAND-UP COMEDY AS A SITE OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION**

While stand-up comedy is an important site for the expression and dissemination of counter-discourses, comedians are limited in their ability to deviate from societal norms and

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expectations. By attempting to ‘push the edge’ too far, comedians may risk alienating the audience. How far the comedian can challenge the institutionalized power systems and hegemonic ideologies depends, in part, on the ‘racial, gender, political, educational, and age demographics of the audience’ (Antoine, 2016: 39). So, while stand-up comedy is a potential platform in which comedians can challenge hegemonic norms and ideologies, comedians are not able to deviate *too far* from accepted societal conventions.

Additionally, even though stand-up comedy and political satire offer a site beyond mainstream media to voice a diversity of perspectives and critique the hegemony, there is still a ‘hierarchy of access’ (Atton, 2002) within the genre that must be addressed here. Comedy has a reputation of being somewhat of a ‘boys club,’ with women (Frazer-Carroll, 2019), especially women of color, struggling to gain much-needed exposure. Recent efforts to open stand-up comedy to a multiplicity of marginalized communities is evidenced by programs such as Tiffany Haddish’s Netflix series, *They Ready*, which is specifically concerned with providing ‘a platform to women, people of color and LGBTQ performers who...the industry often overlooks’ (Villarreal, 2019). Yet, stand-up comedy has a long way to go. In developing this project, research into stand-up comedians who address abortion and female reproductive rights in their sets yielded long lists exclusively comprised of male comedians (Scomedy.com, n.d.). Female stand-up comedians are talking about female reproductive rights and abortion in their sets, only they are not given the same amount of exposure as their male counterparts.

To that end, while Arnold and O’Kane perform their marginality and adopt a stage persona that challenges gender conventions and supports a critique of hegemonic femininity, whether Jeselnik’s performance actually challenges hegemonic femininity is questionable. He undermines efforts to challenge the hegemony with a hyper-masculine and misogynistic stage persona and a narrative about his experience taking a female friend to get her abortion. As a result, he caters to societal gender conventions and risks reinforcing a patriarchal structure that subordinates women to men. It is noteworthy that Jeselnik dedicated fifteen minutes of his set to the topic of abortion - most of his bits last no longer than one minute (Appendix 1: 3) – and his overall set does seek to shatter societal ‘taboos’ surrounding the issue of abortion by engaging with it in the realm of entertainment, but he limits its ability to de-stabilize hegemonic femininity by failing to capture the comprehensive aims of female reproductive freedom and, instead, centers his narrative on the language of choice. Yes, this challenges hegemonic ideologies that place motherhood at the center of femininity, but fails to express the lived experiences of a diversity of women. Individual jokes within his set challenge gender norms and offer a unique perspective to the issue of women’s access to abortion. That said, by focusing nearly exclusively on abortion through the entirety of his set, Jeselnik perpetuates misconceptions that the fight for female reproductive freedom is one centered on abortion.

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In spite of these limitations, Arnold and O'Kane demonstrate that stand-up comedy can be a potent site of resistance against hegemonic femininity and patriarchal systems of power. Both engage with discourse that broadens conceptualizations of the aims and needs associated with female reproductive freedom, one that includes, among other things, abortion, health care, and the right to be sexual. Additionally, they problematize the discourses which seek to limit female reproductive freedom and use political satire to invite their audiences to consider the issue from perspectives beyond the ones offered by the dominant culture (Hill, 2013). At the same time, they challenge societal gender norms and push the boundaries of behavior and identity categorizations to offer a critique of the systems which propagate those conventions. With that in mind, as the genre of stand-up comedy continues to open up to a diversity of marginalized voices, the expression of these counter-discourses may ultimately contribute to the feminist goal of the empowerment of *all* women.

## 6 CONCLUSION

Conceptualized from the framework of feminist theory, this research studied alternative media representations of the issue of female reproductive rights to understand how discourse can challenge societal power structures which seek to subordinate women to men. Focusing specifically on stand-up comedy as a form of alternative media, this project considers which discursive tools are available to marginalized communities who challenge hegemonic beliefs about femininity. Through the methodological approach of critical discourse analysis, this research identifies ‘pushing the edge’ of hegemonic femininity to expose latent assumptions and the gendering or non-gendering of discourse as two discursive techniques which contemporary stand-up comedians use to challenge hegemonic femininity and the discourses threatening female reproductive freedom.

It is important to note that while stand-up comedy offers an site of resistance against hegemonic ideologies, the platform does have a number of limitations. While stand-up comedians may ‘push the edge’ of hegemonic ideologies, they are limited as to how far they can go in terms of offering new perspectives and breaking with the status-quo. Comedians who deviate too far from societal norms may risk losing their audience and, ultimately, their ability to spread their message by appealing to communities beyond the counter-publics from which they develop their discourses. Also, stand-up comedy has a ‘hierarchy of access’ that affords men a greater degree of exposure than women. While there have been some changes to open up the genre to a diversity of voices, stand-up comedy has a long way to go in terms of supporting a multiplicity of women and the storying of their lived experiences.

A number of interesting insights arose while operationalizing this study that, due to the limited scope of this project, could not be elaborated on. Of particular interest is the changing nature of stand-up comedy in the digital age. All of the sampled material in this set was performed in front of a live-audience only to then be distributed to a streaming audience. Further research into differences between audience response and experience is needed to better understand how comedians are structuring sets for an ever-increasing streaming audience while maintaining the integrity of the live performance.

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## APPENDIX I: LIST OF SAMPLED MATERIAL

Name of comedian, Year. *Title*. [stand-up format]. Available at: web site address/URL [Accessed date].

1. Arnold, E., 2019. *Abortion. Abortion. Abortion*. [Spotify stand-up comedy album]. Available at: <<https://open.spotify.com/artist/2uXTm1J2IHdLYFpz9YOGDZ?autoplay=true&v=A>> [Accessed 3 July 2019].
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